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Allen Eaton and the Department of Art and Social Work: Social Work in the Appalachian Arts and Crafts Movement¹

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Abstract

This paper explores a singular chapter in Social Work, Appalachia and American culture. Like many other aspects of Appalachian culture and politics, it is primarily a tale of extended effort for what proved to be a lost cause. Like many other chapters in the history of the social work profession, it is a tale of a bright beginning and insufficient follow-through. It is an optimistic narrative of expected and unanticipated consequences that have proven to be beneficial for the culture and economy of the region. It is also a deeply political narrative, if only because it is dramatically at variance from both the boldly heroic and utilitarian myths of origin that the social work profession usually offers and the view of social work usually offered by the other social sciences. In the former views, social workers often construct for themselves myths of origin in which wise and insightful predecessors foresaw the need for the modern profession in the daily details of the sooty industrial city. In the latter views, early social work is usually presented as a largely ineffective, female dominated, idealistic, pre-scientific and even slightly daft collection of do-gooders with little impact on culture or history and no real idea of the meaning of science.

Introduction

The story of Allen Eaton, his friends and supporters including Edith Dame Campbell, and his advocacy for a Department of Art and Social Work in the Russell Sage Foundation in the decades when it was known as “the social work foundation” offers a short, but instructive, chapter in the history of culture politics in the Appalachian region and the country. It is a record of both singular accomplishment and failure at institution building. Yet, the facts of the case run so much across the grain of prevailing contemporary notions of art, social work, and social change -- that it is extremely difficult for “post-moderns” like us to develop anything approaching a full appreciation of it.

For a few years in the first half of the twentieth century, there was a unique convergence of the Appalachian arts and crafts movement represented by Olive Dame Campbell and a wing of the emerging profession of social work. The glue that

¹ Based upon archival research in the Russell Sage Papers of the Rockefeller Archives, North Tarrytown New York. An earlier version was presented at the 1994 meeting of the Appalachian Studies Association.

held these highly disparate pieces together was Allen Eaton and his aspirations for the creation of a Russell Sage Foundation Department of Art and Social Work.

Had Eaton succeeded in his efforts to forge stronger links between social work and the arts, aesthetics of beauty and the sublime like those espoused by the early Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr might today rank with justice and personal growth as central social work values. Since he did not, this is only a fascinating tale of a unique moment when the interests of social work and the arts and crafts movement in America converged and a cautionary tale of what might have been.

Olive Dame Campbell was the widow of John C. Campbell and ghost co-author of his book on life and culture in the southern mountains (roughly, what we know today as Appalachia). She was also the founder of the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC, and a long-time activist in the Appalachian arts and crafts movement. Eaton was a career staff member of the Russell Sage Foundation and author of a pioneering study of the crafts of Appalachia, who became Director of the Sage Foundation's short-lived Department of Art and Social Work in the 1940's, near the end of the 40-year term of social work influence in that foundation. Together, Campbell and Eaton made important contributions to the study and revival of traditional Appalachian crafts. Eaton attempted throughout his career to forge links between the arts and social work, from his base of operations at the Russell Sage Foundation, which was widely known during the first four decades of the twentieth century as "the social work foundation."

Art and Social Work?

To anyone familiar with either contemporary social work or the modern art world the juxtaposition of these two may seem very odd indeed. However, through the very different lens of the American arts and crafts movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the contemporaneous social reform ideals of early social workers interested in bringing beauty and aesthetic sensibilities into the lives of various marginal members of society the juxtaposition did not seem odd at all. One of the few other convergences of social work and art comparable to the work of Allen Eaton at Sage was the influence of Ellen Gates Starr, co-founder with Jane Addams of Hull House settlement in Chicago. Few people today realize that the art museum was the very first program undertaken at Hull House or that the Hull House physical plant was filled with a wide variety of *objets d'art*. Starr was the prime mover in the creation of the art gallery at Hull House, and the development of a wide variety of art appreciation lectures and craft activities in the Hull House program. (Deegan, 1988) Eaton shared with Starr, Jane Addams and other progressive-era social workers a – sometimes rather sentimental but always very real – concern for the humanizing and civilizing qualities of art -- a position that was as controversial in social work then as it would be today. The Pond brothers – Allen B., who served on the Hull House board for many years, and Irving K. – were among others associated with Hull House who shared a strong interest in arts and crafts. The brothers resided for a time at Hull House and later designed many of the

buildings added to the Hull House campus. They were also strong advocates of the arts and crafts movement in Chicago.

Social work in the early decades of the twentieth century was a far different enterprise from the professionalized, bureaucratized state-licensed service profession it has become today. This was especially true for Allen Eaton as it was for representatives of the settlement house movement like Starr, Addams and the Pond brothers. Eaton, like the founders of Hull House identified social work in largely moral and educational terms as a cause -- the application of creative intelligence to bring about democratic community change. In West Virginia, at approximately the same time as Allen Eaton, L.J. Hanifan was an educational reformer who was part of the national community schools movement that also included at one time Mary Parker Follett. While adherents of social work in this broad sense continue to work for social and cultural development throughout the Appalachian region, many of them are no longer aligned with the modern social work profession, and most of those who are feel varying degrees of alienation from the profession. In particular, interest in art and culture as aspects of a well-rounded social service program has almost completely given way in Appalachia as it has elsewhere to more utilitarian and mundane visions of efficient and effective social work "service delivery".

Aesthetics and Charity Organization

Eaton's historic involvement with the arts and crafts of Appalachia provides support for the claim that an interest in the arts was once a part of both major wings of the emerging social work profession. (For information on the history of social work, see Trattner, 1994) Through Starr and Addams, aesthetic interests as part of the settlement house philosophy have long been known. Generally, the Russell Sage Foundation was primarily associated with the other major wing of the emerging social work profession through its Department of Charity Organization and its early support of social problems research.

Allen Eaton's work is, of course, well known to folklorists, handcrafters and Appalachian scholars. It is almost totally unknown in social work. Yet, his singular efforts at the Sage Foundation to link art, social work and regional development, in the context of Sage Foundation support provided to the Campbells and others from three generations of foundation leadership may also point to some future reconsideration of the humanistic side of the charity organization movement in social work. (For a brief, but conventional view, see Arnove, 1980, 57-62) In particular, Eaton's work points toward unrecognized affinities with the humanistic, citizenship and community aspects of social work usually attributed only to the settlement house movement.

Eaton and the Sage Foundation

Allen Eaton joined the staff of the Russell Sage Foundation in the early 1920's. He began negotiating for creation of a Department of Art not long after – late in 1926. The Department of Art and Social Work was officially created in the late 1930's and effectively discontinued when Eaton retired in the late 1940's. The Department of Art and Social Work, (along with virtually every other surviving vestige of “social work”) was formally expunged from the foundation in the 1949 reorganization at Sage, which forged a lasting alliance with quantitative and positivist social science and erased all vestiges of connection with its social work origins. Eaton died in 1962. (RSF Papers, IV4 B1.3, Box 33, Folder 267.) His legacy includes four published books and what would today be called a technical assistance role in the creation of several enduring Appalachian arts and crafts institutions.

“Go East Young Man”

Eaton's departure from Oregon in 1918 at the age of 40 was an ignominious one, which left him angry and embittered for the rest of his life. An outspoken opponent of American entry into World War I, he had operated a bookstore in Eugene, Oregon and served in the state legislature after graduating from the University of Oregon. His opposition to the war is another parallel with Addams, who was similarly outspoken. It was apparently somewhat more acceptable to express opposition in Chicago than in Oregon, because Eaton may have been literally forced out of town whereupon he went to New York City. Two decades later, in 1938 Eaton was still sufficiently alienated that he refused to return to his native city even when the University of Oregon granted him an honorary doctor of laws degree

"In recognition of his foresight and courage as legislator, citizen, and public servant; his tireless endeavor in promoting an appreciation of beauty in art and creative craftsmanship, and his sympathetic and enlightened understanding of the vital contributions which foreign peoples have made to the culture and civilization of America." (RSF Papers, IV4 B1.3, Box 33, Folder 267)

He spurned all efforts by the community to make amends. The Portland *Telegram* editorialized on June 1, 1938:

This honor has by far more significance than the customary bestowal of some degree, for it seals the state's disapproval, after many years, of a grave injustice done this fine citizen during the frenzy of World war fury, when he was misunderstood because of his attitude for peace, much as was the late Dr. Harry Lane, who died of a broken heart because of nation-wide criticism of his vote against war in the United States senate.

"Eaton was far ahead of his day and time in seeing the futility of a "war to end all wars," and spoke his mind. It was no time to do so, it seems, for he was quickly branded as disloyal, and no amount of explanation on his part could dispel the storm which raged about him. He left his home in Eugene and associations he held dear there, and transplanted his young life to New York City, where in time he became affiliated with the Russell Sage Foundation...."(RSF Papers, IV4 B1.3, Box 34, Folder 268)

Eaton had operated his book and arts store in Eugene for 12 years. From this base of operations, he had gotten extensively involved in promoting the arts of Oregon at Worlds Fairs in Portland (1905), Seattle (1909), and San Francisco (1915). By 1916, Eaton was already acquainted with Robert DeForest, President of the Russell Sage Foundation and one of the leading social/cultural impresarios of his time, but who is virtually unknown today. DeForest already shared Eaton's enthusiasm for the arts and social reform. In addition to his leadership of the New York Charity Organization Society and his instrumental role in the creation of RSF, DeForest also served as President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for nearly four decades. Eaton's acquaintance with DeForest proved crucial when he left Oregon and moved east. After a brief, wartime term with the Emergency Shipping Board in New York, he was appointed in 1919 as the first field secretary of the American Federation of Arts, another group over which DeForest presided. A year later he joined the Sage Foundation staff as an assistant to Shelby Harrison in the Division of Surveys and Exhibits. (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 370.)

What's In A Name?

Eaton came to RSF with a declared interest in beauty as a component of social welfare. (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 351.) He "believed social work could be strengthened and enriched by a wider recognition of the power of the arts, in a broad sense, and that the arts could gain if there were a clearer conception of their social function." (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 369.) In a 1943 report to the RSF trustees on the creation and development of the Department of Art and Social Work, Eaton argued that "there is a great need to bring into the field of social work a wider recognition of the power of beauty in the lives of all people. (RSF Papers, IV 4 B1.3, Box 34, Folder 268) Eaton may have come to this convergence of art and social work early in his career, but it took a long time for the foundation to make a place for it. Early in his tenure at the foundation, Eaton, perhaps channeling Jane Addams, organized a number of "Americanization" exhibitions for public schools in New York City, and proposed a study of the contributions of immigrants to American life. In 1932, the Sage Foundation published a volume, entitled *Immigrant Gifts to American Life*, six years after Eaton had first proposed a department of art and social work. There can be little question that for him the concurrence of art and social work was a long-term cause. A 1940 memo from Eaton

to Shelby Harrison, who was by then Director of the foundation, makes clear that both preferred the name Department of Arts and Social Work over Social Aspects of the Arts, Social Uses of the Arts, or Department of Arts and Crafts. Whether Harrison truly favored establishing the department, or was merely humoring Eaton is less clear.

Throughout this time, Eaton also became increasingly involved with development efforts in Appalachia. His work in Appalachia must be seen in the broader context of his plans for promoting art and social work. In addition to his work on handicrafts in Appalachia and the book on immigrant contributions to culture, Eaton also published a study of crafts in New England (1949) and a study of beauty for the blind (1959). In 1940, Eaton was also involved with the Department of Agriculture in planning a survey of handicrafts and other rural arts carried out by Mary LaFollette. In 1946, as he was approaching retirement, his report to Harrison listed 22 projects underway or contemplated. (RSF Papers, IV4B1.3, Box 34, Folder 268) The list clearly shows Eaton's engagement with current social problems and social work as well as various manifestations of the arts and crafts movement. (See Appendix A for a list of project titles.) Yet, it appears that after his retirement both the New England and blind handicrafts book were finished and published.

Olive Dame Campbell

In its most important achievements, the RSF Department of Art and Social Work reactivated and relied heavily upon an earlier RSF alliance with Edith Dame Campbell. Officially, the RSF Southern Highlands Division came to an end shortly after John C. Campbell's death on May 2, 1919. (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 281-2.) Campbell, reformer and college president, is remembered today as a founder of Appalachian studies. However, the longest lasting work of the Southern Highlands Division was actually completed after his death by his widow, Edith Dame Campbell. Following her husband's death in a New York City hotel room on one of many periodic visits to the Sage Foundation, it was actually Ms. Campbell who put his research notes into a form suitable for publication in 1921 of *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, perhaps the ur-document of Appalachian studies.

Although authorship of the book is formally credited to Campbell, the book was actually completed by his widow who worked from a partial outline, several manuscript fragments and mostly his extensive notes. Campbell himself had long resisted suggestions that he write such a volume, partially because of his concern that he would be viewed by his many Appalachian informants as breeching their confidences. (We have this on the authority of John Glenn, one of the co-authors of the official RSF history, published decades later in 1947.)

Olive Campbell's contributions to Appalachian studies were in no way limited to finishing her husband's *opus magnum*, however. She also made several important contributions of her own to Appalachian studies and regional institutions.

Contemporary association of the Appalachian region with distinctive musical styles and instruments is based upon the pioneering field research of Ms. Campbell and her associates. She is primarily remembered also as the founder of the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, and a moving force (together with Eaton) in formation of the Appalachian Craft Guild.

From her earliest travels throughout the Appalachian region with her husband (some of which were in a covered wagon!), Olive Campbell had begun to collect the folk ballads that she heard sung in different communities they visited. In 1916, she persuaded Cecil J. Sharp, a well-known English folklorist who was visiting America, to travel with her in the Appalachian region. In nine weeks with Sharp they were able to expand her already substantial collection to 450 tunes, 325 of which were published the following year, in Sharp's words, "exactly as we took them down from the lips of the singers, without editing or adornment 'whatsoever'". (Campbell & Sharp, 1917, x). David Whisnant (1983, 103-180) offers a thorough and balanced assessment of the Campbell-Sharp collaboration, and its implications for cultural politics in the region. Olive Campbell also compiled a directory of mountain schools in the Appalachian Region from RSF records. (1921 [1929]) After her husband's death, however, her institutional locus shifted gradually from the Sage Foundation to the General Education Board. In 1925-26, RSF awarded her a planning grant to examine the feasibility of establishing a folk school in the mountains. The Sage Foundation, however, did not follow through and fund the school. The John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina opened in January, 1926 without financial assistance from RSF, but Foundation staff "followed its development with sympathetic interest" according to the official RSF history. (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 282)

The Southern Mountain Worker's Conference

Through John C. Campbell, the Sage Foundation had also been instrumental in several earlier Appalachian regional ventures such as the creation of the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers in Atlanta in 1913. (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 122) The Folk School feasibility study proved to be an occasion for the Foundation to rethink its commitments in the Southern Mountains. Robert DeForest may have had reservations from the very beginning about the Appalachian projects, and may have only gone along with them because of the active advocacy of John Glenn, whom he had brought in from the Baltimore Charity Organization Society as Executive Director. On February 15, 1913, for example, deForest wrote to Glenn: "Off hand, it does not seem to me that the work Mr. Campbell is doing in the southern mointains (sic) justifies its being reckoned or called a department. Moreover, a department assumes a permanent division of work of the Foundation. I should not think that we ought to put Campbell's work on that basis.... In that case my best judgment would be to leave well enough alone; not to give any greater degree of permanency to this line of work than we already have." (IV4B1.3, Box 4, Folder 31)

Eventually, deForest prevailed (as he usually did!) and the Southern Highlands Division was completely closed out a short time after Campbell's death in 1919. However, RSF support for a number of other community projects in the Southern mountains continued, presumably under Glenn's wing. For example, RSF continued to support the annual Southern Mountain Worker's Conference, which Campbell had initiated. Each year, from 1919-1931, a little over \$1,000 was granted to support the conference. (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 479) After that, reduced support to the conference, and to Berea College in Kentucky for publishing *Mountain Life and Work*, the official publication of the Southern Mountain Worker's Conference, were continued until 1946. (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 657)

Eaton and the Appalachian Arts and Crafts Movement

The Department of Art and Social Work deserves recognition not only in the history of social work and the history of the Appalachian region, but also in the history of the Arts and Crafts movement in America. Before its support ended completely, however, the Russell Sage Foundation was also to be instrumental in supporting the development of an indigenous Arts and Crafts movement in Appalachia through the combined efforts of Eaton and Mrs. Campbell. Thus, Allen Eaton and his quixotic Department of Art and Social Work were to have an important formative influence on the development of the arts and crafts movement in Appalachia.

In 1926, Olive Campbell invited Eaton to the annual meeting of the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers where the subject of handicrafts was on the agenda for the first time. In December of that year, Eaton met with a small gathering in Penland, North Carolina to discuss his proposal to create an organization of persons interested in promoting arts and crafts in the homes and schools of the Southern Highlands. The group resolved to request further study of the issue by the Conference, with the assistance of RSF (that is to say, Glenn and Eaton) and in December, 1929, the Southern Highland Craft Guild was formally organized. Eaton, under the aegis of the Guild, arranged the first comprehensive exhibit of mountain crafts of the region in a local church in Knoxville, Tennessee, in connection with the 1930 annual Conference of Southern Mountain Workers. (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 374)

Aspects of Eaton's art and social work initiative showed clear signs of the expanding influence of empirical social science, and in particular, survey research at the foundation. The resolution calling for creation of the Guild also called for "an early survey of the handicrafts in the schools and homes of the Southern Mountains as a fact basis for the association's wisest developments," Eaton's involvement with other RSF projects delayed that study until 1933, but then it became his major focus for the next four years. (Glenn, Brandt and Andrews, 1947, 587.) In 1937, Eaton's "systematic study and collection of material" were published by the foundation in

the book entitled *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*. The book received international acclaim and went into a second edition by 1940. It sold particularly well in Scandinavia where the arts and crafts movement was strong. (RSF Papers, IV4B1.3, Box 33, Folder 267) By 1949, the book had sold 8,347 copies, but despite that the foundation still had 1,200 copies in stock. (RSF Papers, IV4B1.3, Box 34, Folder 268)

Beauty as a Social Problem

Eaton refers at several points in his memos and papers to the aesthetic ideas of John Dewey, Robert Henri and Schaefer-Simmern, among others. (Eaton, 1944) However, his underlying concept of art appears to have more in common with the nineteenth century naturalism of John Ruskin and William Morris than with twentieth century aesthetics of, for example, John Dewey's *Art and Experience* or Henri's work or thoughts, or any of the 20th century artistic *avant garde*. Bringing beauty to the lives of common people and discovering beauty in their lives and work seem to be the core ideas behind Eaton's advocacy of the Department of Art and Social Work as well as his work on Appalachian handicrafts.

In a 1944 presentation to the Sage Board of Trustees, Eaton said "Art, as I see it, is just the best way of doing something that needs to be done. It is therefore not the thing that is done, but the way in which it is done that determines a work of art." (Eaton, 1944, 1) This conception of art, he continued, was basic to the activities of the Department of Art and Social Work: "Working on this broad principle, the endeavor of the Department from the beginning has been to bring into the circle of the arts many things which have, thoughtlessly I think, been excluded, notably the most widely practiced branch of art, the handicrafts; and to bring into the circle of social work many new uses for the arts." In that same report, Eaton identified five values of handicrafts: economic, educational, social, therapeutic and esthetic. A 1943 Plan for the Department, identifies a range of unfinished tasks, including a proposed study of Handicrafts in New England, an exhibit of objects of beauty for the blind, articles on rural arts and various activities in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture. An earlier series of memos in 1933 refers to a study of arts and crafts in the Virgin Islands. (RSF Papers, IV4B1.3, Box 34, Folder 268; Lohmann, 1994A).

Conclusion

A loose-leaf note in the archives seems to provide a fitting epitaph for Allen Eaton: "Allen H. Eaton carried on work in the areas where the arts and handicrafts and social work have interests in common." The Department of Art and Social Work is a case study of a triumphant lost cause: The Campbell-Eaton coalition provoked international interest in the arts and crafts movement in Appalachia, conducted important (but now dated) scholarship and worked together in creation of several pioneering Appalachian institutions. However,

the legacy of Eaton's concept of the "arts and social work" on contemporary arts, social reform, or the social work profession has been minimal at best. To be sure, concern for the arts may periodically surface in the modern social work profession, in the guise of "art therapy", "music therapy" or some other instrumental concept of the practical uses of arts to heal sick individuals or treat a diseased society. Eaton's fundamental concern for the absence of beauty in ordinary people's lives as a social problem, however, has disappeared without a trace. Like a number of other efforts to define social work broadly as humanistic and citizenship endeavors, the Department of Art and Social Work succumbed to the superior forces of bureaucratization and professionalism.

The end of the Department of Art and Social Work, like that of other Progressive-era social work activities, including others associated with the Russell Sage Foundation (e.g., *The Survey* publication) was an ignominious one. Eaton's employment at the Sage Foundation was apparently intended to continue through the end of 1945, to give him time to complete the New England Crafts study, but he seems to have held on for another year before retiring. (RSF papers, IV4B1.3, Box 34, Folder 268)

His tenure at the Foundation may not have always been an easy one. A May, 1941 memo to Harrison from another Sage employee complains of the huge volume of materials Eaton has accumulated occupying at least five separate rooms in the increasingly crowded Sage Foundation building. Presumably many of these materials, like most of the early social work records, were destroyed in the general house cleaning that occurred in 1948. Following his retirement, the Department of Art and Social Work disappeared completely along with virtually any further institutional connection between the Foundation and the Southern Mountains, now generally known as the Appalachian region. Taking their place at the foundation were groups of positivistic and empirical social scientists who devalued the earlier social work core of the foundation's program to the status of a "pre-scientific precursor" and demonstrated no further interest in "pre-scientific" concepts like art and social work. Despite this, however, interest in Eaton, the department of art and social work and their programming in the Appalachian region lives on, particularly within the contemporary Appalachian crafts movement.

Indeed, a curious measure of the perceived irrelevance of the Department of Art and Social Work in this brave new world of social science is the indifference evident in the fact that a small number of records of the department survive in the Sage Foundation archives today. This is in marked contrast to the treatment accorded the Pittsburgh Survey of 1907. The records of that venture, long a target of sharp criticism by "scientific" survey research methodologists galled at the pre-scientific use of the term survey to describe anything lacking proper statistical sampling procedures, were completely expunged from the archival records of the Sage Foundation, presumably after the 1940's reorganization. (For more information on the Sage takeover, see Glock, 1967, especially the article by Fred Massarik and Arnove, 1980, especially the articles by Seybold and Fisher). Anathema apparently can be the fate of scientific as well as religious heresies. By contrast, the efforts of Eaton and Campbell in

promoting Appalachian arts and crafts and their concern for beauty were not judged to be heretical, merely irrelevant.

Appendix A

1. An Exhibition of Objects of Beauty for the Blind
2. Artistic Activity: A Social Force
3. The Handicrafts of New England
4. Relationship with the Department of Agriculture
5. Study on the American Home
6. Handicrafts In Our Machine Age
7. Handicrafts of the City Dweller
8. Handicrafts of or for the American Negro
9. Experiencing the Arts in Wisconsin
10. The Minimum Wage and Rural Handicrafts
11. Art Resources of the American Citizen
12. The Conservation of Hand Skills
13. Color Prints for Convalescents
14. Handicrafts in our National Parks
15. Relating the Arts to Social Work
16. The Arts As Social Forces in American Settlement Houses
17. Folk Arts in America
18. Unsuspected Potentialities in Artistic Expression and Appreciation in American Institutions for Handicapped
19. The Arts of Our Foreign Born Citizens
20. The Arts of the Japanese in Our War Relocation Camps
21. The Arts in County, State and Regional Fairs
22. Color Prints for Homes and Schools

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